DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 159 620 CS 004 348

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TITLE Children's Literature for the Gifted Elementary School Child.
PUB DATE May 78
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (23rd, Houston, Texas, May 1-5, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academically Gifted; *Exceptional Child Education; *Gifted; Grade 6; High Achievers; *Instructional Materials; Intermediate Grades; *Language Arts; *Literature Programs; Talented Students; Teaching Guides; Teaching Programs

ABSTRACT

A literature program for gifted sixth graders meets one hour per day three days a week and covers four topics during the year: biography, realistic fiction, poetry, and tragedy. The biography unit consists of reading three biographies, completing three corresponding directed reading activities, and writing a five page research project on a famous person's life. The second unit, realistic fiction, includes reading three novels, completing three directed reading activities, completing three book reports, and writing an original short story of approximately three pages. The third unit, poetry, includes reading, writing, and discussing numerous poems and a class writing project of a book of original poetry. The final unit of the year, tragedy, includes reading three plays and taking field trips to see a tragic movie and play. Each unit includes a learning package and group discussion. The culminating activity for the year is a class project of writing and performing a play. Each activity and unit includes specific educational goals for gifted children. (TJ)

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Children's Literature for the Gifted Elementary School Child

Presented at the Twenty-third Annual Convention
of the International Reading Association
at Houston, Texas
on May 3, 1978

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Children's Literature for the Gifted Elementary School Child

The Gifted Child

According to the British Education Act of 1944, there are three types of gifted children: social leaders who are concrete and practical; studious achievers who are supreme in the realm of mechanics and technology; and creative intellectuals who are our literary and abstract geniuses (Torrance, 1965). Some have a high IQ and exhibit such creativity; some exhibit both superior intelligence and a special talent for such things as art, music, or mechanics; and some students display many attributes of social leadership. In sum, all gifted children have the potential to attain at least one of the following: superior intelligence test scores, excellence in various academic areas, complete development of a specific talent, or development of a creative response to their environment (Fliegler, 1961).

Such a gifted person is curious, personally involved in academic problems, and needs solitude. He has a great desire for knowledge which he usually satisfies by enriched reading. He has an excellent vocabulary, good reading ability and a wide variety of reading interests. As his visual and auditory perceptual skills are quite mature for his age, he performs well in most verbal areas, particularly those related to the area of general knowledge. Yet his reading rate is not rapid, primarily because, as a result of his superior memory, he spontaneously taught himself to read via the sight word method of teaching reading (Fliegler, 1961).

In addition to an excellent memory, the gifted child also possesses the following characteristics. He is sensitive, likes to be challenged, is not easily frustrated, identifies and clarifies problematic situations, makes use

of hypotheses, spontaneously draws upon his past experiences, acts properly in critical situations, is openminded, easily grasps new ideas, spontaneously develops generalisations, and possesses strong intellectual integrity (Kough, 1960).

The above internal resources enable gifted children to make adequate use of their IQ's which usually range from a low of approximately 115 to about 200. According to the Educational Policies Commission those people who possess an IQ of 137 are considered highly gifted and are often talented in at least one other area (Thomas & Crescimbeni, 1966).

These gifted children have more adjustments to make than their age peers because they are superior in health, physical development, emotional stability, and social maturity. Yet, because of their native ability, they usually experience success in both academic and extra-curricular activities. Many are outstanding athletes or have varied hobbies. They are usually good looking, successful, highly stable, and obedient. They often enjoy those social situations in which they can exert their leadership or speak to a group. Yet, when studying, they like to work alone for large blocks of uninterrupted time (Thomas & Crescimbeni, 1966).

Their goal is excellence. As students they can study intensively and can remember information for long periods of time, they like to work independently on long units and make their own decisions regarding their completed activities. Usually, they will avoid repetitious drill type activities; and they are often impatient with the manually dexterous aspects of their reporting such as their penmanship. As they have so completely mastered most of the basic skills, during their projects they spontaneously concentrate on hidden meanings, evaluation of information, research activities, and reacting to the author's purposes (Thomas & Crescimbeni, 1966).

The National Council for the Gifted defines a gifted child as a person with "high intelligence and potential for unusual performance in any creative or socially useful area of concern " (Kough, 1960). Witty's definition of a creative adult as one who exhibits " a consistently superior performance in any socially useful endeavor " (Torrance, 1965) flows from the above statement about a gifted child. These and other modern definitions of giftedness often include the concept of creativity, for creativity is now viewed as a definite aspect of giftedness (Labuda, 1974).

According to the U.S. Commissioner of Education's definition of giftedness a gifted child must have the potential to acquire outstanding success in general intellectual endeavors, in a specific academic area, in creative or productive thinking, in leadership, in the visual or performing arts, or in the area of psychomotor functioning if he is to be eligible for enrollment in a federally funded educational program for the gifted. As determined by objective measures and professional evaluation, approximately three to five per cent of the school population meet this criteria. One half of these children taught themselves to read before they entered school and walked and talked early. They are alert, learn quickly, and are advanced in visual, auditory, language, and listening behavior. They relate well to older children and like to play individualized games, like concentration. Ninety per cent of these children enter college, thirty per cent of them graduate (twenty percent of these graduate with honors), and sixty-six per cent of the graduates go on to graduate work in the area of their interest, if they have both the drive and the opportunity to do so (Labuda, 1974).

In sum, a gifted child is original, spontaneous, and flexible in his search for meaning (Labuda, 1974).

The Purpose of a Literature Program for the Gifted

To dream, to learn, to laugh, to enjoy the familiar, and to explore the unfamiliar -- these are some of the reasons why gifted elementary school children should be exposed to literature. While they are reading for pleasure, these children are absorbing those facets of the content that reflect their developmental values. They are building a concept of the society in which they live and of their roles in that society. They are sharpening their sensitivity to nature, people, and relationships, while they are satisfying their needs for love, belonging, knowing, beauty, and order (Arbuthnot & Sutherland, 1972).

One of the purposes of a literature program for the gifted is to acquaint these children with their literary heritage and to develop in them those understandings and skills that will enable them to make continued progress in appreciating fine literature (Huck & Kuhn, 1968).

In addition, as each gifted person lives essentially alone, within himself, and finds few moments of real communication and sharing, the use of literature helps a gifted child understand the difference between being alone and being lonely. Through literature a child can become aware of his inner resources and can be taught that creative solitude is essential for achievement and for individuality (Huck & Kuhn, 1968).

As a gifted child moves toward maturity, literature can help him learn to be true to himself. It can also help him develop confidence in his own ability and inner need to create. Through vicarious moments of decision literature can lead a child to conformity or individuality, to responsibility or complacency, to concern for others or preservation of self, and to good or evil. Thus, literature, as a foundation for character development,

establishes, cultural expectations, influences emotional development, and cultivates social sensitivity (Huck & Kuhn, 1968).

Thus, a literature program for the gifted should provide opportunities for children to experience, enjoy, and appreciate literature. It should develop taste and a knowledge of both the classics and of famous authors. It should teach a child to differentiate between different types of literature, and should strengthen his language abilities. It should also expose him to basic evaluative standards of literary criticism. But, most of all, literature should foster creativity (Huck & Kuhn, 1968).

Creative reading is one way of fostering this creativity. It is a thinking process through which new ideas are originated, evaluated, and applied. To read creatively is to be sensitive to problems and possibilities, to be aware of gaps in knowledge, to resolve unsolved problems, and to fill in missing literary elements from the reader's personal experience (Labuda, 1974).

A child who is reading creatively has a goal. He formulates intelligent responses, makes valid decisions, and synthesizes realistic conclusions for specific purposes. Permanent skills and interests are, thus, developed via the practice of creative reading (Labuda, 1974).

By instructing a child to read for a variety of creative pruposes, the child is challenged to think divergently. As he opines beyond the material he is reading, he is blending his newly acquired ideas with concepts that he has already amassed. Thus, given the opportunity, most gifted children can produce novel conclusions (Labuda, 1974).

In sum, literature exposes gifted children to interesting characters and situations, to vivid descriptions, and to well chosen words. Creative reading of this literature permits gifted children to empathize, visualize, and think

through an idea. Therefore, the emphasis in creative reading is more on the process of reading than on the product that is being read. Its objective is to develop personal independence, a conscientious approach to morality, an extension of knowledge, and a realistic perspective for idealistic visions. By making intelligent, creative choices, the gifted child can use literature to satisfy his personal interests and feelings, to enhance his personal lifestyle, and to accelerate his rate of learning (Labuda, 1974).

A Program for the Gifted

Enrichment or acceleration is usually the core of instructing the gifted. This author's preference is for an enrichment type of program which provides for continuity and for individual differences. The program should encompass definite behavioral objectives, should develop a wide variety of talents, should provide for a systematic method of discovery, and should promote intellectual, inter-peer stimulation. In addition, it should possess extensive resources and make frequent use of field trips and small group discussions, for gifted children need a broad and balanced program that will stimulate their intellectual, emotional, social, cultural, and physical growth (Fliegler, 1961).

Enrichment programs should emphasize independent, creative learning. Therefore, the classroom environment should call for gifted behavior. Gifted students can cope with difficult and frustrating learning tasks. In fact, they perfer to learn in such creative ways as exploring, questioning, experimenting, manipulating, and testing. They like to know the purpose for their assignments. This purposefulness leads to personal satisfaction and to the creation of a responsive learning environment (Torrance, 1965).

Gifted children prefer self-initiated learning. Therefore, in a program for the gifted, each child can work independently on a different, but

related topic. Via research and reports the children can then share their knowledge. A spiral curriculum, one that turns back on itself at higher and higher levels of complexity is, thus, best for these children (Torrance, 1965).

Gifted children can look at something until they see something not seen before. They can learn to listen and to understand deep levels of interpretation. In an atmosphere of acceptance and approval, these children can descriminate between what is good and what is best, can share original responses, and can appraise each other's work. Thus, for them, the best type of program is one of horizontal enrichment which makes use of such research (Fliegler, 1961).

Horizontal enrichment is the intentional differentiation of material to meet particular needs and to develop interests. Little time is spent on skill directed drills. Instead, much time is spent on library work, audio-visual presentations, independent reading, and creative activities. In this individualistic approach, directed reading activities are often used to teach such skills as scanning. However, horizontal enrichment is basically involved with units of interest and with guidance in the area of book selection. It aims to meet the developmental, personal , and adjustmental needs of each student (Fliegler, 1961).

Within the structure of horizontal enrichment, gifted students can be used to stimulate other students, to assist the teacher, and to put on demonstrations. These activities stress the gifted students' use of their skills, and will aid in the development of their initiative and their creative ability. It will teach them good work habits, cooperation, to accept criticism, and to make good use of their time (Kough, 1960).

In sum, gifted children are self-motivated. In a flexible learning environment where they can experience love, self-actualization, achievement,

and satisfaction of their curiosity they will be happy (Thomas & Crescenbeni , 1966). They enjoy the responsibility involved in independent study, research, reporting, group discussions, creative writing, pupil-teacher planning, and artistic productions (Kough, 1960).

The Program

The following is an example of an enrichment program for gifted sixth graders. It meets for one hour per day, for three days per week, for the duration of one academic year. Three topics are covered during the first part of the year: biography, realistic fiction, and poetry; while most of the second semester is devoted to the study of tragedy (Kough, 1960). As an introduction to each new topic one teacher directed session is held.

Group IQ and achievement test scores, record cards, and teachers' recommendations are used as a basis for admission to the program (Kough, 1960), and it is assumed that approximately five per cent of the appropriate school population qualifies for this program (Labuda,1974).

Evaluation consists of the students creative productions at the end of each topic (Kough, 1960), and it is found that their major difficulty stems from the amount of time that they are expected to work independently.

Biography

The biography section of the program consists of the reading of three biographies, the completion of three corresponding directed reading activities, small group discussions, and the completion of a short Learning Activities Package on research skills.

The Learning Activities Package is included here to show the children that

research is one of the tools that they can use to find answers to their questions and to pursue their individual interests. The writing of a five page research paper on a famous person's life utilizes the procedures introduced in the Learning Activity Package and is this unit's culminating activity.

Biography was chosen as this program's first topic because bright children turn to biographies to identify with success. According to Havighurst, during the period of middle childhood (which ranges from about six to about twelve years of age) the child attempts to build a wholesome attitude toward himself and to learn a successful male or female role. He also attempts to develop a conscience, morality, and a scale of values. He tries to achieve personal independence and to find a successful place for himself in his peer group and in social institutions. Identification with the successful main character in a biography helps him achieve these goals (Labuda, 1974).

In addition to providing identification with success, biographies also serve as a medium for projection. They help gifted children develop their self concepts and their attitudes toward achievement. Biographies also influence the gifted child's behavior, help him establish his lifestyle, and develop his goal setting characteristics (Labuda, 1974).

Biographies also help gifted children satisfy their desire for new experiences. They help them gain new insight into behavior, try on new roles, and develop and extend their interests (Huck & Kuhn, 1968).

As a child's first hero is a "doer" who is a member of his own particular group, biographies help children to identify with others. They teach children to acknowledge, with pride, their membership in particular religious, intellectual, social, and ethnic groups (Arbuthnot & Sutherland, 1972).

These biographies usually portray heroes who surmount obstacles to achieve

good. These heroes possess specific strengths and weaknesses, and struggle between good and evil. Thus, while these heroes serve as a means of entertainment, they are also related to the child's attempt to achieve his developmental tasks (Huck & Kuhn, 1968).

In sum, biography satisfies the gifted child's needs for hero worship and identification, for biographies present models of greatness and make the past come alive. But, most of all, biographies show that everyone possesses the ability to serve, the potential for goodness, and his own place in the world. Biographies, thus, demonstrate that via actions and decisions men make and shape their own destinies (Huck & Kuhn, 1968).

Realistic Fiction

The second part of the program deals with realistic fiction. Each child reads three novels, completes three directed reading activities, completes three creative book reports, and shares his thoughts on the books he read with the class. Numerous small group discussions are held during this time, and this unit's culminating activity is the creation of an original short story of approximately three pages.

The reading of realistic fiction was chosen because ordinary situations are sometimes difficult for gifted children. Sometimes, these children's expectations or responses differ from those of other children. Thus, they experience many problems of adjustment. Through fiction, gifted children can encounter other people who have also had personal, social, and educational problems and have conquered them (Labuda, 1974).

Fiction shows children that special people can maintain an inner serenity as they struggle with and master their problems. Often, these insights,

projected into their own lives, serve as a catharsis for the gifted child's fears and anxieties (Arbuthnot and Sutherland, 1972).

Sometimes fiction is a means of meeting life's hardships for the first time. Thus, through these books, the readers can see their world in a new perspective, can learn respect for others' capabilities and weaknesses, can see a mirror of their own behavior, and can see their own dreams and fantasies portrayed. They are exposed to the fact that individual responses to life are determined by physical appearance, size, ability and handicaps. Therefore, through vicarious experiences, they learn to know themselves and to acknowledge that everyone is different. They learn, vicariously, to cope with responsibility and they see the communication of real feelings about loneliness and "differentness" (Huck & Kuhn, 1968).

Creative Writing

A gifted child's appreciation of writing increases as he reads widely. He is motivated to write if, through literature, he has had interesting, exciting, and rich sensory experiences that have presented a depth of feeling about people, places, or things (Huck & Kuhn, 1968).

Because of such personality characteristics as fluency, flexibility, and originality, the gifted child can easily elaborate upon ideas which he can develop in detail. He can also redefine what he has perceived. Creative writing, thus, helps him express his sensitivity to defects and problems and his large number of unusual ideas in a variety of ways. Therefore, it helps develop his powers of creative thinking (Torrance, 1965).

Creative writing is, thus, an appropriate avenue of expression for a gifted child's superior language ability. This ability, which stems from a

special sensitivity within the nervous system, brings happiness to gifted children, for it stabilizes their concept of self-realization. Thus, acquainting these children with fine literature and then having them write original short stories helps them raise their standards of writing, for this procedure shows them that they, too, can express feasible, socially acceptable, and personally satisfying solutions to problems in a vivid and interesting way (Fliegler, 1961).

Poetry

The third part of the program deals with poetry. The author prepared a poetry file for the class and each child reads, writes, and discusses numerous poems throughout this part of the program.To guide each child's work a Learning Activities Package on poetry is also provided. The culminating activity for this unit is a book of original poetry written by the class.

Because a gifted child is more deeply affected by stimuli than an average child is, poetry exposes him to diverse ways of reaching his potential. It fosters profound creativity and leads to sensitivity to problems. It also promotes intense curiosity, a great fluency of ideas, the concepts of flexibility and originality, and an awareness of imaginative descriptive writing. Poetry, thus, helps a child enter the world of fantasy. It emphasizes divergent thinking and helps him develop his self-concept and an openness to new experiences (Huck & Kuhn, 1968).

Poetry broadens and intensifies a gifted reader's life. It illuminates, clarifies, and deepens everyday experiences, while it develops a whole new way of seeing the world. Poetry appeals to both thoughts and feelings, and satisfies a gifted child's natural response to rhythm, for gifted children are intrigued with the sound of language and enjoy unusual combinations of words. The

sensory images found in poetry reflect the way they explore thier world (Huck & Kuhn, 1968).

To recapture or intensify the memory of a beautiful experience is one of the purposes of poetry. It helps a gifted child recapture the beauty of a scene or increase his sensitivity to an idea or a mood. Poetry thus instills in the gifted child an emotional response to the environment, to an event, or to a universal phenomenon. It helps develop taste and a respect for language, as it shows the gifted child his unique self-potentialities (Huck & Kuhn, 1968).

Poetry builds a gifted child's confidence in his reading ability, and develops his language, his critical, and his analytical skills. As poetry is meant to be read for enjoyment, it subconsciously makes a child want to read. Thus, it develops his interest. It also makes him aware of the influence of language on behavior and shows him that words can change from time to time, from place to place, and from situation to situation (Huck & Kuhn, 1968).

But, most of all, poetry fosters creativity, for it teaches sensitivity to detail and perception of unique combinations of common relationships. Through poetry, a child can see and express the uncommon; can develop the purpose, persistence, motivation, attention, and concentration to create; and can develop the self discipline to redraft. Poetry thus enhances a child's self confidence in his ability to express his fluency of ideas, for, in the process of teaching poetry, the child's teacher rewards his originality and dares the gifted child to be as "different" as he can be (Fliegler, 1961).

Tragedy

The last topic that is covered during the year is tragedy. A small Learning Activities Package is provided to help the children learn the

elements of drama and of tragedy, and field trips are undertaken to see a tragic movie and a tragic play. Whole group discussions of these presentations are also held.

Shaw's Saint Joan, Sophocles' Antigone , and Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet are read and discussed. Directed reading activities are also provided to guide the children in their reading of these plays. Readability studies on the above plays have been performed to ascertain these plays' usefulness for this particular group of students. These readabilities were calculated via the use of Frye's readability graph.

Certain difficulties surfaced in this endeavor because of the structure of drama. In certain sections of the plays, many of the sentences were extremely short and simple because they represented conversation. At other times, long dramatic monologues or stretches of poetry were found. These selections possessed long sentences and many polysyllabic words. Thus, depending upon what passages were selected, the readability surveys of these plays differed drastically. However, this author feels that these plays are appropriate reading material for gifted sixth graders.

Tragedy was chosen as the final part of this program because it is the form of drama that best helps a gifted child experience other places and other times. By identifying with tragic heroes and heroines, the gifted child can perceive the universal problems of man and can vicariously experience either the delight of beauty, wonder, and humor, or the despair of sorrow, injustice and ugliness. He can observe nature from a different perspective, ask questions of himself, dream dreams, and enjoy the feeling of belonging to humanity (Huck & Kuhn, 1968).

Tragedy can help relieve a gifted child's tensions by helping him create

a safe atmosphere in which to attempt to understand both himself and the nature of being. Drama, and particularly tragedy, can thus be used as therapy to develop the understanding of specific personal needs. If a gifted child can be made to identify with a particular character, both insight and catharsis can result. Thus, emotional awareness of motivation, a removal of suppressed desires, or a release of emotions can be the outcome. These phenomena should lead to personality assessment, adjustment, and growth. By identification with a tragic hero or heroine the gifted child meets a common person with a cause. He can, thus, vicariously face dangers, overcome hurdles, and develop those uncommon, heroic qualities that are needed to meet individual challenges (Huck & Kuhn, 1968).

By participating in creative dramatics a gifted child can broaden his living and learning experiences. By playing a role associated with people from the past, from foreign places or from different socio-economic or racial situations, a gifted child can gain insight into human behavior. He can become more sensitive and learn to cooperate, to accept and give criticism, and to draw on his own inner resources (Huck & Kuhn, 1968).

Drama also teaches gifted children to express themselves and to communicate effectively. As it develops them mentally, socially, emotionally, and physically, it teaches these children to solve their problems by using their imagination (Fliegler, 1961).

While they are releasing their emotional tensions and gaining psychological stability and understanding, those children who do get involved in creative dramatics are also experiencing a purpose for cooperation, communication, and sensitivity to others' feelings. Thus, they are absorbing cultural and esthetic values while they are fostering their social development and their

critical thinking (Fliegler, 1961)

For a gifted child, perceiving leads to thinking; thinking leads to reacting; and reacting leads to personality development. Through drama, a child learns to know and to believe in himself, to release his ideas, to use his creative imagination, and to realize his own power. In this enriched atmosphere of stimulation and freedom, he learns both leadership and the ability to lose himself in a character. Thus, his full range of abilities is challenged (Fliegler, 1961).

Culminating Activity

The year's culminating activity is in the form of an integrated day. The students write and perform an original play for which they have researched and made the costumes and the scenery, and have chosen or written and played the music.

According to Kough gifted children should be taken on educational trips, for this form of guided enrichment, if it is followed up properly, fosters their creativity, their critical thinking, and their skill of conceptualization (Kough, 1960). According to Fleigler, the proper follow up for an educational trip is a large project that integrates all of the academic subjects. This type of project stimulates the gifted child's powers of unification, identification, synthesis, selection, and interpretation; and is a positive outlet for those feelings associated with the confrontation of a changing image of himself (Fliegler, 1961).

Therefore, an integrated day approach is an excellent finale for an enrichment program for the gifted, for it enables them to utilize in a creative and productive way, all of the concepts and methodologies to which they have been exposed during the year.

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